

Message Text

SECRET

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ACTION SS-25

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 SSO-00 /026 W
-----123046 071843Z /42

O 071715Z AUG 78
FM AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
TO SECSTATE WASHDC NIACT IMMEDIATE 4723
AMEMBASSY BEIRUT NIACT IMMEDIATE
AMCONSUL ALEXANDRIA NIACT IMMEDIATE
INFO USMISSION USUN NEW YORK IMMEDIATE
AMEMBASSY CAIRO IMMEDIATE
AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS IMMEDIATE
AMEMBASSY AMMAN IMMEDIATE

S E C R E T SECTION 1 OF 2 TEL AVIV 10055

EXDIS

ALEXANDRIA FOR SECRETARY AND SAUNDERS

E.O. 11652: XGDS-1
TAGS: OVIP (VANCE, CYRUS), LE, SY, IS, MILI
SUBJECT: APPROACH TO SYRIA ON SITUATION IN NORTHERN LEBANON

REF: (A) DAMASCUS 4508; (B) SECTO 9014

1. JUST BEFORE DEPARTING JERUSALEM THIS MORNING, SECRETARY VANCE SPOKE BY TELEPHONE TO PRIME MINISTER BEGIN AND TOLD HIM THAT I WOULD BE IN TOUCH WITH HIM AS SOON AS WE HAD A REPORT FROM DAMASCUS ON THE DEMARCHE BEING MADE BY OUR CHARGE CONCERNING THE SITUATION IN BEIRUT. ACCORDINGLY, UPON RECEIPT OF REF A, I TELEPHONED BEGIN.

2. DRAWING WITH CONSIDERABLE SELECTIVITY FROM REFTTEL, I TOLD BEGIN ABOUT KHADDAM'S ASSURANCES THAT THE SYRIAN FORCES IN BEIRUT WERE EXERCISING SELF

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RESTRAINT DESPITE THE ESCALATING PROVOCATIONS DURING THE PAST WEEK FROM THE CHRISTIAN MILITIAS. CITED THE EXAMPLE OF PROVOCATION GIVEN IN PARA TWO TO ILLUSTRATE. GAVE HIM NEARLY ALL OF THE SUBSTANCE OF PARA FOUR, ALTHOUGH I LEFT OUT THE ALLEGATION THAT THE MILITIAS WERE "CARRYING OUT ORDERS FROM ISRAEL." THE ONLY PORTION OF PARA FIVE THAT I USED WAS TO STRESS THE OVERWHELMING

MILITARY CAPABILITY WHICH SYRIA ALREADY HAS IN BEIRUT AND THE FACT THAT SYRIAN FORCES ARE ACTING UNDER AT LEAST THE NOMINAL ORDERS OF THE LEGITIMATE PRESIDENT OF LABANON, PRESIDENT SARKIS, IN ATTEMPTING TO IMPOSE LAW AND ORDER ON A CHAOTIC SITUATION.

3. FINALLY, I CONVEYED MOST OF PARA SIX, INCLUDING THE FIRST SENTENCE AND THE ASSURANCE IN THE LAST SENTENCE THAT SYRIA HAD NO DESIRE TO ESCALATE THE SITUATION; ON THE CONTRARY THAT SYRIA WISHED TO END THE FIGHTING.

4. AFTER CONVEYING THIS LESS THAN REASSURING MESSAGE, I FOLLOWED THE GUIDANCE GIVEN ME BY SECRETARY VANCE THIS MORNING CONCERNING ISRAELI INTENTIONS. I TOLD BEGIN THAT THE SECRETARY WANTED ME TO SAY AGAIN THAT IN OUR JUDGMENT SENDING A FEW TANKS TO THE CHRISTIANS OR OTHER EQUIVALENT GESTURES OF SUPPORT WOULD ONLY LEAD TO FURTHER TRAGIC ESCALATION IN THE FIGHTING, GIVEN THE OVERWHELMING MILITARY SUPERIORITY OF THE SYRIANS. I ALSO GAVE HIM MY OWN PERSONAL JUDGMENT THAT THERE WERE CLEARLY SOME AT LEAST AMONG THE PHALANGISTS AND CHAMOUNISTS WHO WERE DOING EVERYTHING POSSIBLE TO KEEP THE POT BOILING AND TO PROVOKE ENOUGH SYRIAN REACTION TO PERSUADE THE ISRAELIS TO COME TO THEIR MILITARY AID ONE WAY OR ANOTHER. HOWEVER, I MADE CLEAR THAT I WAS IN NO WAY TRYING TO JUSTIFY THE LEVEL OF SHELLING AND
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LEBANESE CASUALTIES WHICH ARE REPORTED HERE TODAY BY THE WIRE SERVICES AND THE RADIO. (AN AP TICKER FROM BEIRUT JUST RECEIVED SAYS THAT THE POLICE REPORTED 32 LEBANESE WERE KILLED LAST NIGHT.) THE PRIME MINISTER LISTENED IN SILENCE TO MY REPORT, THEN SAID THAT HE AND HIS COLLEAGUES WERE DEEPLY CONCERNED BY THE REPORTS REACHING THEM OF THE LEVEL OF SHELLING AND THE LOSS OF LIFE. HE SAID THEY WOULD OF COURSE TAKE INTO ACCOUNT IN THEIR CONSIDERATIONS OUR ASSESSMENT. HE ASKED ME TO REMAIN IN CLOSE TOUCH WITH HIS GOVERNMENT ABOUT FURTHER DEVELOPMENTS, AND PROMISED THAT THE ISRAELIS WOULD DO THE SAME WITH ME. HE SAID THEY WOULD HAVE TO CONSIDER CAREFULLY THE SITUATION IN LIGHT OF THE RESULTS OF OUR DEMARCHE.

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AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS IMMEDIATE

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EXDIS

ALEXANDRIA FOR SECRETARY AND SAUNDERS

5. COMMENT: UNLESS THE FIGHTING DIES DOWN PRETTY QUICKLY, MY GUESS IS THAT THE ISRAELIS WILL BE UNDER IRRESISTIBLE PRESSURE TO SEND AT LEAST SOME HEAVY ARMAMENT SUCH AS THE SHIPMENT OF TEN OLD TANKS WHICH THEY HELD UP LAST WEEK PENDING THE SECRETARY'S VISIT HERE.

6. HAVING READ AND REREAD KHADDAM'S COMMENTS TO PELLETTREAU, I CANNOT ESCAPE THE FOREBODING THAT THE SYRIANS MAY WELL BE ABOUT TO EMBARK ON AN EFFORT TO BRING THE CHRISTIAN MILITIAS IN EAST BEIRUT TO HEEL. IN LIGHT OF THE CONTINUING NEWS REPORTS OF HEAVY SHELLING, IT IS HARD TO GIVE MUCH CREDENCE TO KHADDAM'S ASSURANCE TO THE SECRETARY THAT "SYRIAN FORCES IN BEIRUT WERE EXERCISING THE UTMOST SELF RESTRAINT." THERE ARE SEVERAL WORRISOME COMMENTS IN KHADDAM'S STATEMENTS TO PELLETTREAU. ONE FOR EXAMPLE IS THE SENTENCE IN PARA FIVE WHICH SAYS "A SECOND COURSE OF ACTION OPEN TO PRESIDENT
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SARKIS WOULD BE TO IMPOSE SECURITY BY FORCE," OBVIOUSLY SYRIAN FORCE. THAT STATEMENT, LINKED WITH KHADDAM'S SUBSEQUENT REMARK THAT "ANY MILITARY MOVES BY SYRIA WOULD BE LINKED TO DECISIONS BY THE LEBANESE GOVERNMENT," AND HIS STATEMENT THAT SARKIS WAS CONSIDERING HOW TO HANDLE THE CHRISTIAN MILITIAS IN BEIRUT AND WOULD BE

BACK IN TOUCH IN A COUPLE OF DAYS (AUGUST 8 - 10?) COULD
MEAN THAT SYRIA IS ABOUT TO GO AFTER THE MILITIAS
ONCE AND FOR ALL.

7. SINCE WE HAVE GOTTEN A MINIMUM OF REASSURANCE IN
DAMASCUS, I BELIEVE IT MIGHT BE ADVISABLE FOR AMBASSADOR
PARKER TO TELL PRESIDENT SARKIS OF THE AUGUST 8 - 10
"RUMOR," AND URGE HIM TO TAKE NO DECISION WHICH WOULD
FURTHER EXACERBATE AN ALREADY TRAGIC SITUATION. CERTAINLY
AMBASSADOR PARKER IS IN THE BEST POSITION TO JUDGE WHETHER
THIS MIGHT HELP, BUT I AM EXTREMELY WORRIED ABOUT THE
OMINOUS OVERTONES OF KHADDAM'S CONVERSATION WITH
PELLETREAU. IF SARDIS GIVES ADDED LEGITIMACY TO THE
SYRIAN SHELLING, THE SITUATION COULD DEVELOP IN A WAY
WHICH LEAVES EVERYONE, INCLUDING THE ISRAELIS, FACING
SOME VERY UNAPPETIZING CHOICES.
LEWIS

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